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SUBJECT: ANOTHER WAVE OF HEAVY RAINS WREAKS HAVOC, LEAVES FIVE PEOPLE DEAD

Ref: (A) SOFIA 1224; (B) SOFIA 1272; (C) SOFIA 1398

1. SUMMARY: The Bulgarian government has declared a state of emergency in 23 municipalities as another wave of heavy rains hit the country over the weekend. The disaster left five people dead and blocked major motorways and railways with mud and debris. The number of buildings, homes and bridges destroyed by flood waters continues to climb, and numerous power outages have been reported. The government reports that the cost of the damage has reached over 500 million Bulgarian leva (USD 313 million). Some of the USD 450,000 in USAID disaster relief funds have been reprogrammed to meet the evolving needs of the affected populations. END SUMMARY.

CATASTROPHIC RAINS FORCE RIVERS OVER THEIR BANKS

2. Another wave of severe rains over the weekend swelled rivers that were already running high, flooding hundreds of houses and forcing the evacuation of over 10,000 people. Near Plovdiv, the Maritsa River burst its banks for the first time in 25 years, flooding parts of the city and surrounding villages. Unlike the previous rounds of flooding this summer (reftel) much of the damage this time was to towns and villages just north and east of Sofia. The weekend downpour obstructed major highways and railways, making it difficult for rescuers to access some neighborhoods. Most train and bus services to and from Sofia were cancelled as a result of flooded roads and damaged railroad tracks. Buses that were already en route had to make long and sometimes dangerous detours in order to reach their destinations. The police advised people to avoid travel due to the danger of landslides.

3. Although the Bulgarian Railways Company has resumed some services, the weekend rains paralyzed most of the railroad system. Landslides have blocked the railway at three main locations, and it will take at least one week to repair the damage. The outgoing Minister of Transport and Communications, Nikolai Vasilev, said that millions of Bulgarian leva will be needed to repair railroad infrastructure.

GOVERNMENT EMERGENCY PLAN PUT TO THE TEST

4. The recent flooding put Bulgaria's new emergency plan to the test. The Director of the Fire Brigade, General Kiril Voinov, said that this was the first time the emergency agencies responded under the Crisis Management Act that was adopted in March. On August 6, the government activated the state's emergency plans, deploying crisis response teams to the municipal and regional emergency commissions and preparing emergency units of the Civil Protection Agency, the Military, the Police and the Ministry of Transport. Municipal authorities, however, have criticized the emergency legislation, claiming that it does not correspond to the situation in Bulgaria. The emergency law requires local municipal crisis teams to handle emergency situations, but municipalities don't have enough funds for this, according to mayors of the worst hit municipalities.

5. As emergency teams struggle to clean up damaged areas, local authorities are working with humanitarian organizations to evacuate survivors trapped in flooded neighborhoods and bring them shelter and hot meals. The Bulgarian Red Cross (BRC) has provided immediate relief aid (blankets and clothes) to the victims of the flooding, who were evacuated and accommodated in schools and other public buildings. BRC has made the necessary arrangements for the provision of food. CARE-Bulgaria is using USAID funds to provide food and water for 5,000 people who were forced to evacuate. CARE will also use USAID funds in the recovery phase procuring pumps, disinfectants, and other remediation materials.

6. COMMENT: After this weekend's heavy rains forced rivers over their banks, emergency teams are now monitoring national infrastructure facilities such as dams and reservoirs in order to minimize risks. Health experts note the danger of epidemics due to the decomposition of many farm animals and the lack of drinkable water. In a positive development, improved weather conditions have allowed rescue teams, with the assistance of humanitarian organizations, to haul food and other supplies to thousands of people who are now homeless. END COMMENT

